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SALON OF THE DILETTANTI—II

THE FARCE OF ART JURIES

It was painters' night at the Salon, and *the* Painter held the floor. It had been whispered about the room in the early part of the evening that



A GRAY MORNING

By J. Francis Murphy

(One of the always "tender")

all his tendered contributions to the current exhibition had been rejected. This, of course, was mere surmise—what the Painter himself deigned to say was, that he was *not* going to exhibit. His temper, however, implied that for once, at least, Dame Rumor had gotten a tid-bit with a grain of truth in it. A jury of acceptance, the Painter declared, was in art matters what the vermiform appendix was in human anatomy—an organ that had outlived its usefulness—if it ever had any—and was a menacing something scheduled for removal, even if the doctors had to play into the undertakers' hands. He strongly advocated a surgical operation without delay, and expressed a desire to be one of the active assistants in the clinic room.

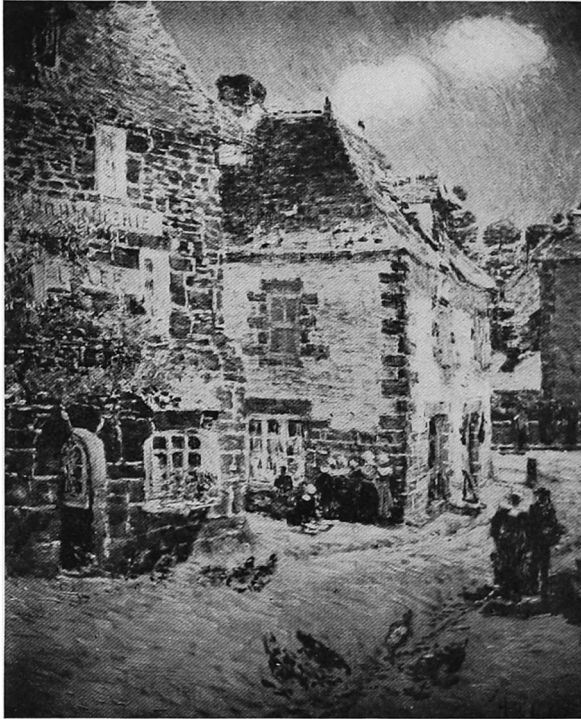
Reasons? The wonder of it that any body of intelligent people like

the Dilettanti should ask for reasons when the grounds for the expressed opinion were so obvious! A jury of acceptance for an exhibition was, the Painter insisted, like a jury of twelve in court matters—a survival of antiquity, a fetich for false worship. Theoretically a jury in legal proceedings was all right, practically it was mostly wrong. In the old days a jury was the symbol of equity, a guaranty of fair dealings. A man was tried by twelve of his *peers*, not by a frosty, opinionated apology for a judge, who had authority to dispense frowns or smiles at pleasure. In these latter days the average jury was made up of court hangers-on, who guessed at truth as nearly as their narrow intellects would permit, and made stabs at equity in the dark for a per diem allowance. Any judge worthy of the exalted position he held would come nearer to truth and equity in one-half the time without the clogs in the jury box. If he got into trouble, the Painter would be sorry to have his case go before certain juries he had known. Somebody hinted pictures, but the insinuation was ignored. Abolish your juries, the Painter insisted, throw art into Chancery and have implied a master. Then you would have results—exhibitions worth seeing, certainly; exhibitions without heartaches, possibly; exhibitions without injustice, probably.

You say, the Painter continued, that this would be reversal of all precedents, a throwing of art into the hands of a few dictators, a calamity to the profession. Possibly; but did facts justify the Dilettanti's fears? The Painter wished to cite an instance or two. It had been openly admitted for years that the best exhibitions in the country had been those of the Academy at Philadelphia. Why? Because Director (now Ex) Morris was *it*, the whole thing. It was an open secret that his jury was a matter of form, a sop to convention. What Morris wanted, he went after, and got; and what he got his jury thought "just the thing" without looking at it. And, deplorable as it may be from the standpoint of conventional practice, the exhibitions of the Pennsylvania Academy were on record to the glory of the institution and of American art. Again, Director Kurtz at Buffalo had begun his work on the same principle. There was at that moment going the rounds of the principal cities a select exhibition of the work of the Glasgow painters. When Kurtz made up his mind to go to Scotland after the pictures, he told his directors so—he did not ask their advice or permission. Had he done so he—like many another director—would have found himself in a convention-made harness of leading strings. Had the pictures secured been submitted to a jury they would have been passed on by men unqualified by lack of knowledge and want of sympathy to render a just verdict. Kurtz wisely elected to do the whole thing himself, and he got results. To shift the scene, Director Beatty, at Pittsburg, was now chafing under the fetters imposed by the jury system adopted by his directors ten years ago and planning to modify it by introducing canvases by "special invitation," which the jury should think worthy of exhibition, willy, nilly. Why? Simply because the strong artists of the country were taking the stand, one after the other, of refusing to submit their work

to be passed on by their inferiors. They said: "You know my work; if your public wants to see it ask for it; but cut out the farce, cut out the farce!"

Strong language? Well, it was needed—the case was desperate. *Wasn't* the jury of acceptance a farce? Take the case of the dear old



MIDDAY, PONT AVEN

By Childe Hassam

(Not always appreciated by other schools)

Academy in New York, which lately inaugurated its eighty-first annual exhibition—selecting its jurors by alphabetical rote, so that sooner or later each academician should have a chance to get a crack at the other fellow! Wasn't it laughable? Imagine the veteran J. G. Brown passing judgment, if you please, on J. Francis Murphy, or vice versa. Why, the men have nothing in common—neither ideals, nor methods, nor technique, nor sympathy—nothing. Result? Well, Murphy would probably say, in good fellowship, of Brown's newsboy, "That's characteristic, let her

go." Brown's always characteristic. And Brown, in the same spirit, would say of Murphy's landscape, "That's tender, pass it on." Murphy is always tender in art parlance. Or suppose it were Childe Hassam and Harry Roseland. Roseland could probably paint an old colored woman so natural that the very paint would smell of hoe cake and cotton bolls; and Hassam one of his out-in-the-garden nudes so life-like that you could actually see the goose-flesh on the skin. But Hassam, if true to his artistic conviction, would be inclined to say of Roseland, "Lithographic picture card"; and Roseland of Hassam, "Mere dabs of paint." "Wasn't it laughable?" the Painter reiterated. Well, that amusing proceeding was being enacted yearly, all over the country, wherever art shows were given, and the best artists were being forced to the conviction that it was preferable to stay out of institutional shows and make their displays under private auspices. It began to look as if the public, if it wanted to see good art, would be driven to the dealers' private exhibitions.

Whistler, the Painter declared, certainly enunciated a truth when he said that no man was competent to pass on a science if he hadn't devoted a lifetime to its study. But juries were not framed on that principle. He had known in a prominent art institution an ex-janitor and a colored man of practically no education, of limited experience, and very meager attainment posing as jurors. Imagine a man like Ranger, or a woman like Miss Cassatt, who refuse to enter their canvases in competition at even the greatest of art institutions, submitting their work for critical decision and acceptance to such an aggregation of incompetents! It was ludicrous.

The fact was that the work of juries was of necessity bound to be more or less farcical for many reasons. For one, there was the element of institutional affiliations to be conserved—no coop could consistently close its lattice against its own chicks. The Painter had known canvases to pass juries because the artist "was one of our boys"; and others to be rejected because the artist "was not one of us." Then there was the disturbing factor of personal likes and dislikes—prejudice or personal interest. The Painter had stood before a masterful canvas by Gallison of Boston, when another artist—and a well known jury-server—who could not do anything so well to save his soul, remarked, "That man has no excuse for painting." He had stood before a portrait by Clarkson of Chicago, when another artist—likewise a jury-server—had said, "That man's work is a joke." Fine mental equipment for jury service!

Then again—not to mention any more reasons for disqualifications—it was obvious that the ruck of the profession was called upon to pass on the performances of the ruck, and being of the ruck was sufficient warrant for their not being of the jury. The Painter had lately taken part in an interesting discussion in Pittsburg, in which an eminently successful business man and a so-called art connoisseur had deplored the fewness of really good artists. He was asked how many men in business were considered successful, and replied that statistics used to show two per cent,

but that now the percentage had been cut to one. Ninety-nine out of every hundred half-successes, quarter-successes, failures! Astounding! Then said a museum director present, don't marvel at the paucity of good artists, for competent judgment places the percentage the same — one in one hundred. What did this mean, the Painter asked. Just this, that the ideal jury, according to Whistler's dictum, is an impossibility, for there would be only one man really competent to pass on the work of the other ninety-nine. Do we want perpetuated a policy by which half-competents or incompetents pass on the performances of half-competent or incompetents; specialists or hobbyists pass on other specialists or hobbyists with whose aims and ambitions they have no interest or sympathy?

No, gentleman, the Painter continued, if the heads of our art institutions are big enough and competent enough for their positions, they are competent enough and big enough to know what they want, and get it. If they are not so qualified, let them get out and make way for others who are. We have enough job hunters and holders in politics — and insurance. For goodness' sake let us keep them out of art. If the conventional jury is so far defunct that it is only to be allowed to pass perfunctorially on the little fellows why bother with the time-honored and time-weakened formality at all? If the jury is to be only a foil for the personal enterprise of the director, abolish the jury and make the director come out into the open, and stand sponsor for his own successes and responsible for his own mistakes. One thoroughly competent man in a community could do more for the legitimate ends of art than all the juries that could be patched up for his "assistance." If the heads of our art institutions who in a sense have in their hands the fostering of the best art interests of the country and the educating of the public in art matters, were so unacquainted with art and artists as not to know whom to seek, so unfamiliar with the sources of desirable material as not to know where to go, so inept at soliciting and securing as not to be able to get what they want, so mentally-nipped-in as not to have sympathy for every earnest artist, or so conscienceless as deliberately to be unfair — why, the sooner they moved on the better. At all events the right *man* could command not merely the respect but the best work of the best artists — and that was all that it was worth while to show to the public in our great institutions — and the average *jury* could not. The Painter, therefore, advocated live men, strong enough to take initiatives and energetic enough to carry them through instead of moribund bodies with half-powers and admitted disqualifications, and promised to present further facts in a future protest.

REPORTED BY THE SALON'S SECRETARY.

